

## Whispers to Lenora / Chantel AEV Rios

As I approached the entrance to my unit, I began to sweat. Was this the day she would die? She had been so sick the past month that everyone had been holding their collective breath waiting for her to go. She had been born sixteen weeks premature. Overall, she had avoided many of the pitfalls of being a preemie: her brain was intact and her gut was fine. Perhaps that is what made the situation even more unbearable.

While I swiped my badge to enter the neonatal intensive care unit, I flashed back to the beginning of her life. For the five months since she had been born, I took care of her nearly every day I worked. I knew her father, and how he drove an hour everyday just to see her. I knew her big brother, and how excited he was for her to come home, and to be strong enough to sleep in the new nursery. I remember visitors looking at her through the transparent sides of her isolette, and those enormous brown eyes staring back at them. As she grew up, we developed a Sunday routine. She would get her sponge bath with extra baby shampoo. Her wild, curly hair would be tamed momentarily with a thorough brushing. While I would change the linens on her crib, she would fight off a nap, and bounce in her swing. All of this time spent just waiting to be well enough to graduate home.

Over the first few months, it appeared she would escape our unit without long-term complications. She was starting to bottle-feed, and discharge home was just a few weeks away. Before I knew it though, we were backpedaling so fast I couldn't remember the sense of hope we began with. At four months old she returned to the ventilator, and we mourned for her loss of a normal infancy. Then one day I turned around, and the staff was having a different conversation about her.

I heard a coworker ask, "When are they going to take her off life-

support?"

When I walked into her room that morning, the knots in my stomach told me she was dying. I gazed at the drawing from her brother, the photos of her parents, and the teething ring hanging in her Christmas stocking. I combed her hair, and put a single pink bow in a ringlet by her face. I guess I couldn't think of anything else to do. By the time her father came, her body was so tired. The team helped get her out of bed for her father to hold. Her body hung in his arms like a thirteen-pound rag doll. Finally, her heart started to slow.

Her father asked, "What's happening?" as he saw her heart hovering low on the monitor.

I hesitated in an attempt to find the right words . . . "Your daughter is leaving us, hold her and love her. She knows you're here." It became unbearable to look at the heartache reflecting through his eyes.

In a nearly inaudible whisper he said, "I can't do this anymore, take her off the ventilator."

I don't remember the details too clearly, because the nurse in me took over. After getting orders from the doctor, my autopilot pushed the IV morphine, and turned off equipment. She was released from the ventilator. In that unnerving silence, when the humming of the monitors, IV pumps, and ventilator stopped, all that could be heard was the sobbing of her father while he rocked his little girl to sleep, his hand stroking her cheek, as she held his finger with her hand.

I sat silently with her father for over an hour while she slipped away, slowly and painlessly. His face rested on the top of her head, while he whispered messages to her. After hours of cuddling, and trying to breathe in a lifetime's worth of her scent, the family drove her father home. I held her for the first time without wires or tubes in-between us, and I too, whispered into her small ear. I kissed her cool, pale forehead, and finished her care. When my shift was over, she was lying alone downstairs. Her crib was cleaned, ready for the next patient. Her name had vanished from the report board.